See Note at end.

UNITY

CHURCH-DOOR PULPIT,

FOR

FREEDOM, FELLOWSHIP AND CHARACTER IN RELIGION.

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THE DANGERS OF LIBERTY.

By the Rev. PHILLIPS BROOKS, Rector of Trinity Church, BOSTON.

"As free, and not using your liberty for a cloak of maliciousness, but as the servants of God."—1 Peter 2: 16.

Nothing in our time is praised like Liberty. It is the war-cry with which you may always stir the souls of men. The taunt of slavery will almost always wake their sluggish wills to action—and nothing more than this fact shows the progress which the world has made and the high plane on which it stands to-day. The time which has reached the passion for Liberty stands within sight of every great achievement. Indeed this is the real glory of Liberty, that it makes great achievements possible. It is not so much a great achievement itself, as it is the condition in which all great achievements must be done. It is as when you find a man half-suffocated, and at the point to die for lack of breath. As you restore his breath to him, as the slow lungs begin to move again, all that is within his faculties to do grows possible to him. The book he is to write, the ship he is to build, the battle he is to fight—all these in some true sense you do as you make him once more a living, breathing man. And so when to a church, a nation, or a man some strong event or series of events gives liberty, it is to that liberating event or series of events that the world owes the power of salvation, the civilizing influence or the fire of genius and high example which are to proceed from all the future action of the church, the nation or the man.

Therefore it is that back of all other desires for one's-self or for mankind lies the desire for liberty. That every man or body of men be free to utter its fullest power and live its fullest life—we must be, O, my friends, we must be fully in sympathy with that great wish, that great passion of our time. If we are not, we cannot be men of our time or do her any worthy service. No fear of the excesses into which liberty may run, no sense of the disasters which may come to or through men not yet prepared for her dominion must make us for a moment think of turning back from our allegiance, and crowning Repression as the sullen mistress of the world. Such fear, such sense of danger may make us very anxious, very watchful that Liberty may do her perfect work and make free men fit for their freedom. But he can be only a weak and timid creature whom such a fear, such a sense of danger tempts to disown the reign of Liberty itself, which is the world's only Hope.

It is the glory of the Bible—it is the fact which gives us assurance that the Bible, and especially the New Testament, is to be more and more the Book of Humanity, that the Bible is the Book of

Liberty. I must not try to unfold in a few preliminary sentences that proposition, which might well be made the subject of a whole glowing sermon. But let your thoughts run through your Bible and feel just for an instant the atmosphere which fills it. Emancipation is its spirit everywhere. To be a slave is everywhere its deepest misery. To be a free man is its perpetual hope. The coming up of the children of Israel out of the Bondage of Egypt is the critical event of the Old Testament. The Son of man breaking the bondage of Death and bringing up the hope of humanity with him is the central picture of the New. The Babylonian Captivity is the Tragedy of the Hebrew History. Sin, conceived of as captivity, the imprisonment of human powers and possibilities in the dark tyranny of Satan, is the Tragedy of the History of Man. The Bible sometimes has been made the Book of Despots. The "Bible argument for slavery" was the almost grotesque paradox which once in our own land was used to mock the Intelligence and Christianity of men. But still the intrinsic nature of the Bible never has been, never can be lost. It is the book of Liberty. It believes in Freedom. "Ye shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free." That is the promise, blown from its golden trumpet, written in letters of gold upon its floating banner, with which it has always won and held the hearts of men.

It is from this book of Liberty that I have chosen to-day a text which declares the Dangers of Liberty. It is from such a book that such a text ought to be chosen—for it is always the friends of any principle or power, those who believe in it and mean to follow it out to the end, who have the best right and the best wisdom to declare its dangers. To whom shall I go to learn the dangers which beset popular government? Not surely to the tyrant who thoroughly disbelieves in the government of the people by the people and hates it with his soul. Rather to him who loves it so sensitively and intensely that he feels every corruption of it like a personal pain—to him who watches it as the sailor watches the lighthouse on the rock and feels his ship quiver with every flicker of the precious flame. It is the wise, earnest churchman who will best tell me the dangers of the church. It is the Christian whose hope for himself and for the world is all bound up in the Christian faith who knows most perfectly where practical Christianity has often gone and may often again go sadly wrong. Something of the danger of an interest or cause its enemies may tell us, but more, far more, its wisest and truest friends. And so it is the friends of Liberty who know and can best tell the dangers of liberty. It was the woman whose soul loved liberty more than any other soul in France who gazed at the statue of Liberty which stood beside the scaffold on which she was to suffer in the Champs de Mars and cried "O Liberty, what things are done in thy name!"

Let us remember this. Let us remember that it is from a book which thoroughly believes in and loves freedom that we take the words which warn us of the perils of freedom. And then let us try to understand what must be some of the applications to our own life of what St. Peter said to his disciples when he reminded them that though they were free, nay *because* they were free, they were not to "use their freedom for a cloak of maliciousness—but as the servants of God."

The field is large and we must try to cover only a part of it. True Christianity is the power of liberty to nations and to churches and to men. Interesting as it might be to dwell on all these three parts of its power, I must confine myself wholly to the last. The State, the Church, —Bondage is death, Freedom is life to both of these. It would be well worth while to show how Freedom coming to them both brings, with its priceless blessings, certain dangers. If we attempted it I think that we should find that in both cases, the danger largely came from the disposition, to which I have already made allusion, to count liberty a treasure in and for itself, and not to value it simply as the condition in which the best action may be done. So often Liberty has seemed to bring not the necessity of higher conscientiousness and faithfulness but the excuse of lower. The freer states and churches have been made, it has

seemed sometimes not the more but the less binding upon them to be just and holy. We must let the states and churches go to-day, but perhaps when we turn to personal lives and ask what are the Dangers of Liberty in them, we may discover that the perils are the same as those which beset free churches and free states. In either case let us remember that we stand by Liberty and never dream for an instant of letting it go because of the dangers it involves.

Shall we take then at once the most prominent of all instances, the growing freedom of thought about the Bible. It is the tendency over which lecturers shout on their platforms and church councils grieve in their council chambers. The lecturers and the church councils both recognize the fact. A fact no doubt it is. To very many Christian men to-day the Bible stands no longer surrounded by that kind of halo of supernatural authority which establishes the truth of every statement in its pages. It has come to seem to many men, what it really is, a gathering of many wonderful books from many times—the time and authorship of some of them being doubtful—which have been brought together because of their common character and their common bearing on one great religious process which runs through the history of man—the Revelation of the Eternal Father to mankind in Jesus Christ. Clearly enough, such knowledge of the nature of the Bible must set the mind free for a treatment of it and a study of its contents such as has not always been possible. Is that Freedom a loss or gain? *A gain*, I am completely sure. In a profounder way because of it the Bible must come, the Bible *has* come to be to many souls the Revelation of God. He shines in its illuminated chapters with a clearer light. The great march of His purposes moving on to their completion in the manifestation of Himself in Christ is heard more solemnly and grandly when the Books in which the Record is enshrined are thrown wide open to the scrutiny of the historic sense. But the great question, the real religious problem of our days is whether men will be strong enough to understand this larger, nobler and devouter use of the Bible. The world never will go back to the old ideas of verbal inspiration. Will it go forward and find in the Bible that Revelation of God which is really there, the revelation which consists not in a detailed transcript of His Will but in the living person of His Son. O my dear friends, the freedom which has come to us in the use of the Blessed Book ought not to make us less but more earnest in our use and study of it. It must teach us deeper and richer lessons. Alas for us if we think that the breaking of old spells and charms about the Bible gives us the right to leave it as an outworn book, and not rather the opportunity and power to press on into its heart.

The same is true about the Lord's Day, about Sunday. Our fathers tell us and we ourselves can, most of us, remember how it used to be a day of Bondage. Now you all know well enough how free a day it is. But we said, you know, that freedom was a means and not an end. The object of setting any principle or institution free is to give it a real chance to do its work. What is the work of Sunday. It is to break the awful spell of worldliness and greed. It is to bear testimony to the spiritual, the divine in manhood and in life. It is to hush the clatter of business so that the voice of God may be heard. It is to give the soul rest and repose so that it may loosen itself from false attachments and turn where it belongs, to the eternal world which lies beneath the temporary all the time. It is because the free Sunday more than the enforced Sunday is able to do these things that we believe in it and rejoice in it. If the free Sunday has no such power for us, we are misusing it. It is dishonored. It is made to fail of its best result. We would not go back to the Sunday of slavery again, but we would plead for the higher conscientiousness which is demanded by the higher privilege.

The same is true of Worship. Set hours of prayer, set forms of words—sometimes we find ourselves rebelling from them. It is not good that we should become their slaves. Only we do need to know this—that the true departure from them into freer modes must mean not

less but more of prayerfulness. You talk about the temple of the woods. You say that you can praise God by the roaring sea. Wherever you and God are there can be prayer, you say. Indeed there can! Almost better that all the temples in the Christian world should be torn down together than that, standing, they should make men forget that truth. But who is he that makes this freedom a cloak of maliciousness if it be not the man who turns his back upon the churches and, saying he can worship anywhere, worships nowhere, or who, despising times and forms of prayer, ceases to pray? But he best uses forms who knows they are not necessary; and there is a lofty way in which the knowledge that he may pray when he will can make the thorough worshipper pray most devoutly at the appointed consecrated time.

What I have said thus far may almost pass for illustration and for introduction. I want to speak more fully of the application of our truth to moral life. I wish that I could speak to all young men as earnestly as it appears to me that the condition of things to-day demands that every minister should speak. For these are days when liberty of moral life is bountiful. Not a few of the outside restraints on conduct have been partially or entirely removed. What the severer and stricter parts of the community think of its lighter and more easy portions is far less regarded than it used to be. The artificial stigmas which were once set on many occupations and amusements, condemning them in all degrees because they were wrong when men used them in excess, have faded almost entirely away. There is a growing dislike of arbitrary judgments which condemn as sins acts harmless in themselves which seem to lead more or less certainly to other acts which are indubitably wrong. Partly in pride, partly in conscientiousness, the private conscience is insisting vigorously upon its rights. And all the dubious discussions about the character and length of future punishment have weakened for a time that certainty of man which never can be totally obliterated, that Sin must bring suffering upon the sinning soul in *any* world of God. I tell the catalogue and then I ask myself if all of these releases are good or bad. Is it a blessing or a disaster for the world that they have come? And I cannot hesitate about the answer. It is good. It cannot but be good when on the conscience of the individual man new burdens are laid and of it new demands are made. It cannot but be good when he who questions whether any act is right is forced down to the deepest, most essential, most eternal reasons why *anything* is right or wrong. Here is the man who forty years ago was asked to do and refused to do some deed which, not wrong in itself, had still presented itself to him as doubtful. I go back there where he is living forty years ago and ask him why he will not do it, and the chance is that he tells me of some social prescription, some standard of the society about him which has decided that that thing must not be done. Here is the same kind of man who *here to-day* meets the same question and makes the same refusal. Why has *he* refused? Here in this larger liberty, with the standards of society less clear and less despotic, is it not the chance that he has gone to deeper motives? May it not be that he has studied his own nature, seen how God has given him a character which is peculiarly exposed on special sides, and resolved that, however it may be for other people, for him to do this act, all harmless in itself, would be to set himself in the way which would lead him to wickedness, and so that it is wrong for him? Here is a noble self-control. For such a self-control only the larger liberty could give an opportunity. Has not his freedom been for him a most inestimable gain?

But now suppose that this latter man has not been worthy of his free condition; suppose he gets no farther than the mere fact that he is free. "I shall not be despised if I do this. The blue laws are repealed. Men will respect my individuality and say, He has a right to do as he thinks good;" and so he does the deed at which he hesitates. What then? Could words describe it better than these words of Peter, "Free and using your freedom for a cloak of maliciousness"? For him the Liberty has been no doubt a curse. What then? Will you, because

of him, think that the Liberty ought never to have come? Will you do what you can to bring the world back into leading-strings again? O hopeless task! You might as well try to crowd back the cataract into the placid stream in which it used to flow along its sloping bed. What can you do? Nothing, but paint to him the darker consequences which come by no enacted law of state or social life, but work their own terrible vengeance on his wronged conscience and his violated nature. And tell him also of the man he might have been, the man he may be yet if, with a kingly self-control, he will mount up to his opportunities and be a law unto himself, or rather, in St. Peter's other words, be, with a child's loyalty, a "Servant of God."

As when one turns from the driving of a herd of brutes and talks to men, so does one turn with anxiety and hope to young men who are privileged to live in free and awful days like these. "You must not do that Deed!" "Why not? What law forbids me? Am I not free? Will you then treat me like a child? The thing is not wrong. Who are you that command me?" "Nay, I do not command you, but I bid you, I adjure you to *command yourself*. In the very name of your freedom you must look forward and see for yourself whither this act will lead you. You must know your own soul and its chances, and, *just because* no other has a right to command you, you must command yourself to do no thing which will be unsafe for your soul."

O Generous young men rejoicing in your freedom, there is no manly way to use your freedom except this! God grant you the grace to be great enough to live in these great days of Freedom!

The fact is the world has come now to a place where it must become a great deal worse world or a great deal better world than it has ever been before. It is a familiar truth to us that men come to such places in their lives, why should not the world come to such a place in hers? There come to men times, not clearly marked as shining instants different from all the rest, but yet making themselves gradually known to the consciousness in unmistakable ways,—there come times in which, old restraints losing their power, it is absolutely necessary that either new and higher restraints must come out into strength or else that the life should become unrestrained. One of the remarkable things about Christianity is the boldness with which it faces the fact and claims to introduce such a time for all the world. Christianity is so much bolder in her treatment of men than Christians, than the Christian church has often been. Christ comes into the world and the Angel who makes announcement of his coming says, "This child is set for the fall and rising again of many in Israel." Ruin and Resurrection both! And Christ himself, when he has come, how often we can see upon His face the sad sense that in giving the world a chance to be so much better by His gospel, He is giving it also a chance to be so much worse. Never for an instant does he think of turning back. He must go on whatever be the issue! How clearly we can see what must have been the state of things in old Jerusalem in those old days when Christ was teaching there. How many a Rabbi, half fascinated by the teaching of the Lord, must have drawn back and resisted the growing fascination and said, "It is very beautiful. It seems to be very true. But it is not safe. If these students of mine, these Hebrew boys, believe Him, the old traditions of their Race will break and lose their influence and who knows whether they will be able to go on into the power of the higher spiritual influences of which He speaks so splendidly?" How many a mother in Jerusalem must have turned away from the face and voice which were holding her too powerfully because she could not bring herself to trust her children to a Teacher who seemed to know nothing except spiritual power to control the wayward soul of man. Yet Christ pressed on and taught his bold truth, often, we may well believe, with a deep sadness in his face mingled with the hope and joy. So it has been with every great spiritual teacher. So it has been in every great time of spiritual enlightenment or progress or reform. So it was when Socrates was accused of corrupting the

youth in Athens. So it was when Luther was breaking the fetters of the Church of Rome in Wittenberg.

Is it not so to-day? Must we not face the fact that it is so? Ought we not to be glad to own that God is leading us on to deeper motives of goodness and faith, and ought we not to set ourselves to work with God to make these higher motives powerful both on ourselves and on other souls? You bring your creed, the creed of the Incarnation, the creed of the divine Christ to your friend and want him to believe it. How shall you win his belief? You cannot look him in the face and tell him that he will certainly suffer everlastingly with the infliction of positive punishment for not believing it. You do not yourself believe that he will. You have learned the great distinction which so many great and good men have been so slow in learning—you know that error is not guilt. But all the more earnestly because you know that, you can tell your friend of the danger which comes to the very substance of the soul itself by either neglecting to seek after truth or refusing to acknowledge truth when it is found. You can tell him how good belief is, how much better every way than unbelief. You can show him how his very freedom has made possible for him a completeness and enthusiasm of believing which no slavish mind, no mind in slavery could reach. So you may try to bring him to the higher motive. You cannot tell your friend, as once men would have told him, that if he goes sailing on Sunday God will drown him. But you may tell him, as men would not have been likely to tell him then, of how his spiritual nature needs his care and watchful tending just as truly as his body or his mind, and you may bid him ask himself whether the way which he has chosen is indeed the best way to spend the time which has especially been set apart for spiritual culture. These are the disciplines of Freedom. These were the disciplines of Christ. Is it not true that a world in which the old restraints are breaking and which is being directly tested by these spiritual motives to see whether it is ready to respond to them is a world which has come to a place where it must be a great deal better or a great deal worse world than it has been heretofore?

We hear much of what is called the New Theology. Let us not quarrel about a name. In that which is generally and vaguely designated by that name I think we ought to thoroughly believe. It seems to me as if the Christian world today were entering upon a movement, nay, had already entered upon and gone far in a movement which is certainly to be not less profound and full of meaning than the great Protestant Reformation of three centuries ago. The final meaning of that movement really is the nearness of the soul of God to the soul of man and of the soul of man to God. It is the meaning of the Incarnation. Just as the time of the Incarnation, the time of Christ's coming in the flesh was a time of Liberty all filled with dangers, so this time of the revived developed sense of the essential privileges of man as the son of God must likewise be a time of privilege all filled with dangers too. O how one longs to beg his fellows that they will truly strive and pray to be worthy of their time. God is infinitely near you and you are infinitely near to God. Therefore you are responsible directly and immediately to Him. Therefore you need not, you must not be the slave of the judgments of your fellow-men. But therefore you must set yourself before His Judgment seat and let yourself be judged by Him. God is infinitely near to you and you are infinitely near to Him. Therefore you may and must expect your own personal revelations of His truth and indications of His will. You are to look for adaptations of the general standards of society and of the Church to your own personal life. But oh, how open-eared it ought to make you and what a sensitive conscience you must keep! God has given you your own life to live. Therefore you must keep very close to Him that you may live it in the light and inspiration of His life.

It all comes to this, that Freedom is a more anxious and watchful state than slavery. Let the slave lie down in the sun and sleep there till his master wakes him for his task or for his food. The free man must keep himself awake and

find for himself both his task and food and suffer for himself if he misses either.

Nor in the highest things is it left to our option whether we will be free or slaves. Freedom is thrust upon us and we must take it whether we will or not. Happiest is he who takes it most completely and most joyfully but also most seriously and with the deepest sense of its dangers. He does not lift up his voice the loudest in its praise but he knows most truly how precious the liberty is. The regiment rushes into the battle with shout and hurrah, eager for fight, believing in their cause. In the midst of them one man presses forward silent, earnest, overcome with a sense that mighty interests are hanging on that hour, all solemn with the conviction that there must be no defeat, all aware of how the very noise of enthusiasm about him makes victory less sure. Is there a man in all the regiment who really honors the cause like him, or to whom the victory when it comes will more be due?

Such men may we be in these great and perilous days where God has set us —full of their spirit—and because full of their spirit, aware of their dangers—accepting them with gladness and with fear —living in them free, brave, independent, conscientious, devoted lives—or, as St. Peter wrote it, "free but not using our freedom for a cloak of maliciousness but as the servants of God."

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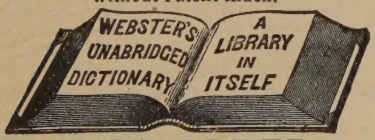

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